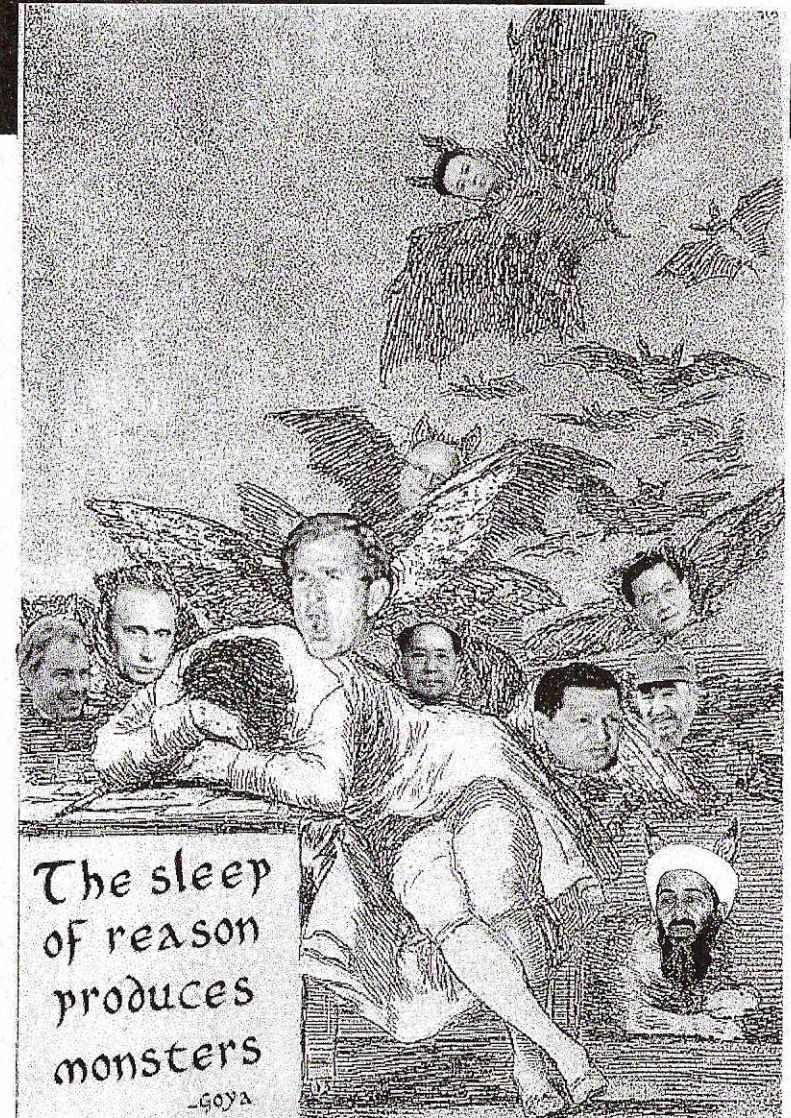




Catalan, 'The World Upside Down',  
early 19th century, print

# THE WORLD CAN'T WAKE



Amnesia and the Anti-War Movement



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ever—those who dream must be clear about their purpose. In the first instance, this means being clear about what differentiates this worldview from that of the authoritarian left, but it also means proposing a different paradigm of social transformation. For too long, anti-authoritarians have themselves been stuck in time, seeking to "reappropriate" or "recapture" the world around them, implying that the world was once theirs (or belonged to some earlier, pristine humanity), thereby failing to realize that it is the re-creation of that social world that is at issue. There can be no minimizing how ambitious and daunting such a task is, in a time when Bush and Rumsfeld talk of a "long war" and pursue their own goal of a total surveillance society; when militant Islam and an equally obscurantist American fundamentalism do battle; and political troglodytes speak in the name of revolution.

The words of Gustav Landauer quoted above are all the more poignant in that they were written as the madness of World War I began, and some 5 years before Landauer himself would die at the hands of proto-Nazis. His words regarding the state—understood in its most broadest sense, as encompassing the prevailing conditions of social life—remain pertinent:

The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another.

It is in the here and now that we must act differently. This means in the first place recognizing that one cannot oppose one lie with another. But it also entails an understanding that one cannot speak in the name of Absolute Truth, either, but only on behalf of certain, and necessarily approximate, truths. Rather than proposing a blueprint of a radically different future—a preposterous idea if one believes that any more promising future must result from a process of collective invention and not unilateral imposition—we (who do not presume to speak in anyone's name other than our own, certainly not that of "the people," who must speak for themselves) can only register a dissenting voice and paint a few insolent brushstrokes on an otherwise dreary landscape.

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**I**  
*Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people are in the city square, chanting slogans against the government and its war. Large numbers of riot police look on nervously. There is a kind of electricity in the air, which is also filled with the sound of drumming, giving the scene a carnivalesque aspect. The crowd roars as the effigy of a hated leader is pulled to the ground...*

**What is wrong with this picture?** Nothing at all, in the abstract, but if one examines the particular canvas known as The World Can't Wait a little more closely, a very different picture emerges, one that is more alarming than inspiring. Behind the WCW initiative lies not some innocuous, ad hoc coalition—as the generic anti-war message emanating from the WCW would suggest—but an authoritarian cult: the Revolutionary Communist Party, a Maoist organization headed by "Chairman Bob" Avakian. This is an organization with a very selective "conscience" and a very narrow spirit of iconoclasm. For the RCP, dead Iraqi civilians represent genocide, but the millions of Chinese (and Tibetan) workers and peasants who died under Mao represent merely the price of "progress" or, more simply, are not counted at all, disappearing in the airbrushed history lessons of the vanguard party. And as for toppling statues, the RCP may have knocked down one of Bush, but they genuflect before their idols Stalin and Mao, and would be quite prepared to erect a monument to Bob Avakian in Bush's place.

Wittingly or unwittingly, those who choose to march under the banners of The World Can't Wait are *feeding a vampire*, thereby giving new life to a political corpse one would have thought interred forever: the bureaucratic left which brought the world such nightmares as Stalinism, the Cultural Revolution in China, Pol Pot's Cambodia, and the Shining Path movement of "President Gonzalo" (Abimael Guzmán) in Peru. To oppose the carnage in Iraq while marching under the auspices of those who espouse authoritarian dogma is a sign both of cognitive dissonance and ethical bankruptcy. And for those protesters who will splutter in righteous indignation at



anyone who impugns their militancy, it is worth pointing out that the question of ends and means also includes the matter of whose cause one associates with, and not merely whose war one opposes.

The antiwar movement in the United States is rife with paradoxes and contradictions. Over the past three years of various "mass mobilizations," the size of the protests has diminished even as the war itself has become increasingly unpopular. Not all of this decline can be attributed to the distorting lens of the mainstream media, which has recently adopted a more critical stance toward the war, or the effects of government propaganda seeking to anathematize dissent. The movement itself has been in crisis, failing to expand beyond its core constituency in terms of mobilizing numbers of people, and unable to adjust its strategy and tactics to respond to new developments.

Among the rank-and-file demonstrators who have come out into the streets against the war, there has been a growing sense of alienation from the official leadership of the anti-war movement. This has manifested itself specifically in a palpable dismay with the sclerotic politics of the International ANSWER coalition, at whose heart sits the Workers World Party, ideologically committed to the defense of North Korea and its Stalinist regime. The sober pacifists of the Peace and Justice Coalition have recently called it a day and broken off relations with International ANSWER. More simply, other protesters have voted with their feet, leaving antiwar rallies in droves even as the amplified, histrionic speeches from the main stage drone on. Unfortunately such disenchantment has not found its positive translation, and in the absence of a conscious search for a different kind of anti-war movement, there has only emerged apathy or a vague dissatisfaction with protest as usual. And it is in the latter waters that the instigators of the WCW have been fishing, with surprising success.

In a more perfect world, any appeal made by the RCP or its front organizations would have been met with scorn and laughter, or simply been ignored. It is a sign of the retrograde times we live in—an era which sees hypercapitalism consolidating itself as a truly global system—that the actions of

drastically curtailed liberties—does emerge, it is all the more reason for opposition to the state to be itself *exceptional*: imaginative, creative, and embodying intellectual integrity, even as it acts out of a sense of urgency or, in the worst circumstances, emergency.

### III

"The time is now when reality shows itself to be impossible and when the impossible wants to become reality."

—Gustav Landauer (1914)

All that is required for monstrous enterprises to prosper is for thinking people to do nothing. This applies to the undertakings of Avakian as much as Rumsfeld. And it is not as if there haven't been people who have tried to think and act differently, who have rejected both Party and Pentagon, both "people's war" and capitalist war. Sadly, whether from a failure of nerve or imagination, such people have proved so far incapable of creating vibrant, dynamic, and horizontal spaces within the currents of opposition that have emerged in recent years. There have been "break away" marches that have been monochrome in dress (the "black blocs") and monotone in message (a "no" repeated endlessly), and, more importantly, have remained mere appendages of larger marches organized by the authoritarian left. There have been a few independent "actions" against the war put on by anarchists, but many of these have seemed mimetic exercises trying to replicate "the Battle of Seattle," events curiously detached from their surroundings (as were the march and rally in Palo Alto in May and June, 2005).

For years now, the mantra of the anti-capitalist movement globally has been "another world is possible." Today, such a world seems farther away than ever, as those pursuing the dream of a new world appear to have abandoned it in favor of refurbishing the old. Pathetically, the anti-globalization movement that once was inspired by the authentically new social movements of insurrectionary Argentina now trails after the populist *caudillo* in Venezuela, Hugo Chavez. If the dream of difference is to be revived—and in dreary and dismal times, a *visionary* opposition to the status quo is needed more than



which at least in its initial stages contained emancipatory possibilities. By the end of the same decade, this movement would dissolve into competing sects all under the sway of different variants of Marxism-Leninism. (One of these sects, in fact, was none other than the RCP, then known as the Revolutionary Union (RU) and already headed by Avakian.) Meanwhile, the organized antiwar movement of today seems to have skipped the emancipatory phase entirely and gone straight to "the highest stage" of senile leftism: the authoritarian party-sect.

Of course, it is always possible to make too much of phenomena such as the WCW, which will probably collapse under the weight of its own contradictions or simply fade away as fewer people show up for events that only repeat themselves. Many of those activists who glimpse the Stalinist core at the heart of the WCW enterprise will be repelled by what they find and how they are treated at the hands of the RCP. As for the rest of the world, it indeed can't and won't wait, and will have barely paused to notice the commotion of the WCW. However, there is always a chance of such actions giving more impetus to the authoritarian left, thereby allowing it to frame the choice before antiwar opponents as one of being either with "us" (the WCW and International ANSWER) or "them" (Bush and Cheney). Such a limiting of choice would be a false dichotomy, but in the absence of an alternative, and in the strange situation where a group such as the RCP can pass itself off as a bunch of civil libertarians, it might be persuasive. At the very least, the longer the WCW goes unexposed—and unopposed—the more the RCP will thrive and the more difficult it will be for a more vibrant and autonomous anti-war movement to emerge.

Despite the hyperbolic and overheated rhetoric of the WCW, we are not living in a "fascist" state. (If so, how could the WCW be running full-page ads in the *New York Times*? How could it be receiving permits for its rallies?). This kind of demagoguery is as cheap as it is dangerous, impairing a clearer recognition by others (who see through the bombastic talk of "fascism") that this is indeed a critical period, one in which many of the remaining social conquests of the past are being eroded or reversed. And if, under Bush and Cheney or their successors, a "state of exception"—a regime of

a predatory and bellicose American state have revalorized the anachronistic and inconsistent politics of "anti-imperialism." The Latin root of the word imperialism, *imperium* or power, is ignored in this kind of opposition to the reigning order. Brute power, as exemplified by the actions of the American empire, is denounced, while its arbitrary expressions elsewhere (whether in Castro's Cuba or in the zones controlled by the People's Liberation Army (PMA) of Nepal) are whitewashed or even acclaimed.

To be sure, the mastodons of the bureaucratic left who have been released from their frozen tombs have taken some care to disguise their age: in the case of the WCW, it is not the RCP of old that one sees immediately, but a softer, fuzzier version hiding behind populist sloganeering. Undoubtedly, most of those who will participate in the WCW action will not be RCP members or sympathizers, and many will not even be aware of whose orders they are marching to. Still, it is disheartening that so many have taken the bait and become *de facto* spear-carriers for a wretched group of would be commissars.

## II

"In war, truth is the first casualty"  
—Aeschylus

In radical politics, ignorance is never an alibi. Moreover, opponents of the present world order self-consciously describe their activity as one of "speaking truth to power". If this is so, then they must first speak the truth to and about themselves. Those who are oblivious of the RCP's role in WCW are either obtuse, disingenuous, or both. The same people who have no difficulty in deciphering the links between the Bush Dynasty and the Carlyle Group or Halliburton are suddenly disarmed in the face of the 1930s-style popular front tactics now being used by the RCP. They claim not to know or care who is behind the WCW. The more cynical admit the RCP's role, but assert that it doesn't matter, that the only issue that counts is stopping Bush and his war. This kind of political expediency is, even on its own terms, counter-productive. Considered from the viewpoint of sheer pragmatism—and the goal of



simply seeking a rapid end to the U.S. intervention in Iraq—allying with the RCP makes no sense, as it only alienates those who could be won over to the anti-war cause.

Even taken at face value, the slogans of the WCW are cretinous: Bush is supposed to “step down” and make way for...Cheney? And just where will Bush take “his program” (as if it were only his to begin with)? The entire thrust of the WCW's public message is a kind of empty posturing. No wonder that it has attracted the kind of celebrity endorsers (Hollywood stars, most prominently) who exercise their profession precisely in the art of posturing. It is disconcerting, however, to see others who seemingly should know better join this inglorious roster. A slew of writers (among them Gore Vidal, Kurt Vonnegut, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti), none of whose literary careers would have been possible in a Maoist state, have signed the WCW appeal. One has the sense of witnessing a kind of mass hallucination in which otherwise critical minds have turned to mush.

Such luminaries are either blind or too lazy to pick up a copy of one of the RCP's own publications and to see how the originators of the WCW talk among themselves. Here, the RCP doesn't mince words or hide behind airy slogans, but rather reveals its true, manipulative face. The January 15, 2006 issue of *Revolution* published a lengthy speech by Bob Avakian in which he is quite candid about how his organization created the WCW as a *vehicle for its own ends*. In his rambling style and delusions of grandeur, the megalomaniacal Avakian resembles nothing so much as a Maoist Lyndon LaRouche (at one point, Avakian bizarrely refers to himself as “our Chairman”, as though he were speaking of someone other than himself), but his words bear paying attention to. Avakian openly asserts that:

...We are very serious about and very dedicated to achieving the objectives of World Can't Wait, at the same time as we see and approach this as part of building toward our goals of revolution, socialism, and ultimately a communist world... (“Polarization...Repolarization...and Revolution” in *Revolution*, 1/15/06)

Of course, it does help to know that each of these goals (“revolution,” “socialism,” and “a communist world”) is tainted

when it comes from the mouth of an Avakian, whose idea of a revolutionary society is that of a party-state monolith, with “our Chairman” at its apex. Even for those taken in by such slogans, there can be no mistaking how Avakian's cadres view the militants drawn to the WCW as mere cogs in their bureaucratic machine. The RCP's instrumentalization of the WCW is spelled out by in this same speech, where Avakian talks of:

...The need to pay attention to what has been called “*harvesting*”—reaping advances, not just in terms of broad and general political influence, but in terms of organization among the masses and organized ties with the masses—harvesting, in that sense, in relation to every significant political event or action. (*Ibid*)

Those whom the RCP seeks to “harvest” might want to think about getting out of the way of the combine bearing down on them.

For those opponents of the war whose goals are truly alternative—who seek not only an end to the war, but to the system that produces such wars—allying with the RCP is suicidal. This is an organization which can, at one and the same time, denounce “the police state detentions” of Bush and Cheney while glorifying the despotism of Stalin and Chairman Mao, whose prison camps and mass executions make the torture chambers of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib look like the work of amateurs. This observation in no way minimizes the bloody deeds of the Bush administration, but it does point up the need for consistency in any perspective that pretends to oppose war and state repression. Exchanging one hypocrisy (“the free world”) for another (“the people's republic”), one system of domination and exploitation for another, is to trade in illusions, and worse, in corpses.

The amnesia that pervades American culture also afflicts the avowed opponents of the dominant social order, who now seem doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. Some, perhaps with the best intentions, are going so far as to literally revive the past, as witness the announcement of a refounding of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Such an undertaking is likely to meet the same fate as the original SDS. In the 1960s, a New Left emerged in the US and elsewhere